Sidelights on the Construction of an Army Cantonment

By R. F. MacDowell, C. E., '09,

One of the Main Streets at Camp Sherman

When asked to write something about the construction of Camp Sherman for The Ohio State Engineer, the editor said, "Don't make it too technical." He had the right idea. I might give a detailed description of the design and construction of the water supply and sewerage system, or the surveying, or the roads, but the human interest side of the "big camp," during its days of formation, would probably make a greater appeal to my readers. That reminds me that it was the personal touch and conversational tone of Prof. Sherman's article in the initial issue of this magazine which made it so highly readable as well as interesting and instructive. I wish to add that I quite agree with him regarding the relative values of the various elements of an engineering education. I find that I have about the same point of view as he, and I have been out of school not half as long. And this point of view shows me that it was the men I met and the ideas they expressed, as well as the manner in which they conducted themselves, which were of the most value to me during my summer at Camp Sherman.

About the middle of June I found myself, one warm Saturday, in the sleepy town of Chillicothe, where the chairs were lined up along the curb in front of the hotel on the main street, and the sidewalks were filled with farmers and townspeople talking in groups or ambling along lazily. I had instructions to start the first work on the new army cantonment and so lost no time in getting out to the site to locate a spot where the well driller was to place his machine. On the way we rode through beautiful farm land where the wheat was almost ripe and the corn just nicely started. It was as peaceful and quiet as any rural scene could be.

Barely a week and this aspect was completely changed. Down town the hotel lobby was filled with men and here and there was an olive drab uniform. The uniform was a rare sight at that time, in a small town, so that folks lined up to watch its wearer go by. But a short time later, however, the town no longer stood in awe of an officer, even a general, and a mere civilian felt out of place with his coat unbuttoned.

But meantime things had started to move fast. Almost before the local newspapers could print the facts a railroad spur had been laid north across a corn field, a large warehouse and a dozen long bunk houses had sprung up in a hay field, and lumber was being unloaded by the scores of car loads. I didn't watch it all for I was handed a copy of "Instructions to Quartermasters," containing, besides a lot of other directions, the basis of design for the sewer and water systems, and was given about three days' handicap on the contractor in the construction race which had started. There was no office available so we usurped the town hall. The honorable council chamber was light and roomy and an excellent place for a drafting room so we piled the orderly arranged desks along the walls and the next council meeting was held perforce in the mayor's office down stairs.

The man in charge for the government when the work started was an engineer reserve officer fresh from Fort Oglethorpe. But a few months previously he had been a member of a large contracting firm in New York. He was filled with enthusiasm for the military training of the officers' school, and was keenly desirous of going "over there." He was thus a little disappointed at first to be given a quartermaster job, but he quickly forgot that in the opportunity which he saw before him to exert his unusual energy and organizing ability, and he was soon instilling a wonderful spirit into the whole construction force.

It is interesting to note that, while the cantonment was built under the general direction of the army, the actual supervision was handled by civilians, or by reserve officers recently recruited from civilian life. Not a single army angineer or construction officer was detailed to the work. The constructing quartermaster, a regular army

infantry officer in the quartermaster corps, who arrived after the construction work was well started, though not an engineer, was a real executive. He was called by one writer a "quiet voiced Texan," and he was thoroughly likeable as well as capable. He would not listen to excuses, though he did not "storm" about it. He determined that Camp Sherman should be in the first rank with the other fifteen cantonments as regarded rate of progress of construction. He maintained a progress department, in charge of a reserve officer, the sole duty of which was to check the amount of work done daily in every branch of the work. Close tab was kept on the other camps and a spirit of rivalry was created by posting bulletins giving comparative charts which showed the percentage completion of the various parts of the work in all the camps.

One instances of the Major's methods was a conversation which the writer had with him one day. The sewer trenching machinery had been slow in arriving and hence, about the middle of July the progress curve for the sewer work was considerably below the line showing the required schedule of completion. Also the sewage disposal plant had not even been started. One day I was called to headquarters and reminded that the sewer system was to be in operation by September 5th. I told the Major we would do our best but my personal conviction was that it would be impossible, for I had no Alladin's lamp. But my reply did not satisfy him and before I left his office I was determined that nothing on earth would prevent the accomplishment of that task. And it was accomplished. Which goes to show what determination will do, especially when given an incentive.

There were many interesting personalities among the contractor's organization. First and foremost among these was the general superintendent. He had been in charge of large construction work in all quarters of the globe and knew human nature thoroughly. It was a pleasure to observe how he handled men. Quick of decision, mild-mannered, always amiable, with an appreciation of details but at the same time always keeping the job in perspective, he allowed nothing to disconcert him. Always approachable, he would listen and give information or directions to half a dozen persons on the way from his office to his automobile. He dressed properly for the job, wearing high buckskin boots, khaki trousers, a soft shirt and a wide brimmed felt hat. He was known as "Mike" and liked it.

Another interesting character was one of the superintendents, who had charge of water and sewer construction. He was a tall, thin but rugged looking, Scotchman from New England, who always wore a knitted string tie and a genial expression. I confess that he did not at first impress me favorably as a construction man but my admiration for him increased rapidly. He never seemed in a hurry and never became excited but I observed that work under his direction was usually accomplished at the time and in the manner he had previously predicted.

There were many other highly efficient and capable men on the work and I found myself observing and indexing their good points for future reference. Of course there was a few misfits as was bound to happen on so large a piece of work with the personnel so hurriedly gathered together. One such I remember particularly. He was all talk, bluff and bluster. Given a responsible position which took him all over the camp each day he did not remain sufficiently long in any one place to form accurate judgment regarding that particular part of the work. He had a young man "secretary" who followed him wherever he went like an aide-de-camp to a general, and who wrote down on a paper thumb tacked to a board everything said by or to his chief. I wonder what he did with those notes at the end of the day. This man, by the way, lasted about one week.

One feature of the work especially worthy of note was the wonderful spirit of harmony which permeated the whole force. There were few misunderstandings and little tendency to criticize, in spite of the enormous pressure under which everyone worked. Each man seemed instilled with a desire to "do his bit" and he was filled with pride to be on such a big job. This spirit, which left no time for arguments or petty differences, was felt even by the laborers, and it kept them contented. There was of course some government "red tape" neecssary but this was eliminated to a great extent. There were no specifications for the construction work, or monthly estimates to the contractor, for the contract was on a cost plus percentage basis. Any other system would have been impossible, under the speed conditions demanded.

One of the side lights of the construction of the camp was the method of housing and feeding the laborers. Of course the small city of Chillicothe could not take care of them, for there were from 8000 to 11,000 men on the work every day, while a total of 65,000 different men were given employment checks during the construction period of about four months. A dozen temporary bunk houses, each about 300 feet long, were constructed during the first week and as fast as the permanent warehouses were completed these were utilized, the contractor furnishing the double decked cots and blankets. Latrines, and wash houses with shower baths, were built nearby, in

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accordance with government sanitary standards. A commissary, or "boarding camp," was also constructed and later, as more men were employed and the work was spread out over the entire 1700 acres of camp site, three more boarding camps were installed in newly completed barracks, at widely separated locations. One of these, near "general headquarters," was for the heads of departments and office employees of both the contractor and government. These commissaries, though operated at a loss, the meals being only 30 cents, surely did their part in keeping the employees contented. The food was excellent in quality, being well cooked and tasty, and was served in adequate quantity and variety. And it was surprising how much one could eat after a few hours work in the open air.

Another feature of the construction work which should be mentioned was the provision which was made to guard the health of the workmen as well as to prevent flies. The sanitary department employed a large force of men and teams and these were kept busy continuously cleaning the barnyards of the abandoned farm

houses on the site, filling in low places, and burning out scores of latrines which were placed in close proximity to all building work. At the close of every day the shavings and small pieces of wood around each building under construction were gathered up and during the following night these were burned, together with the corn stalks which had been cut to provide room for the erection of more buildings. In this manner a fire, which would have been disastrous to the completion of the camp, was avoided.

The only indication that an army camp was being constructed was the presence of several companies of recently federalized national guard troops and also a "regular army" truck company. The latter manned about forty large army trucks which were driven through from "the border" for use in hauling lumber and other supplies at the camp, as well as for transporting labor to and from the work. The trucks, which were of five-ton capacity, were always given the right-of-way, without argument, on the main camp road, by mere pleasure cars. It was quite a sight to see these trucks lined up and starting for the boarding camps, each holding from 40 to 50 laborers.

The men of the infantry companies served as guards, traffic officers, chauffeurs, clerks, orderlies, and many other useful capacities on the work. They were a happy, well-behaved lot and seemed to enjoy their life at the camp immensely. They took delight in challenging pedestrians, especially at night, by calling out "Halt!" followed by "Corporal of the guard, post No. four!!" And Mr. Civilian had to show a properly signed pass before he could proceed.

One day early in September, without formal announcement or cessation of activities at the camp, and almost without causing comment, there arrived at the railroad station several trainloads of "selects" called from stores, offices and factories all over the state. Several completed barracks were soon occupied the straw stacks on the farms surrounding the camp melted away as bed ticks were filled, and the next day squads of "Rookies" were lined up by capable but jestingly called "Incubator" officers, from Fort Benj. Harrison, and the training of the National Army had begun.